

Jenny Simpson

by Jon Hendershott

The last steeplechase Jenny Simpson ran—an American Record 9:12.50 for 5th in the '09 World Championships—came some 18 months ago.

Since then, the 24-year-old Colorado grad has had mixed fortunes: her first pro year covered just four outdoor races as a stress reaction at the head of her right femur forced her to end her season early. But she has run well this winter.

Even though she has considered a future in the 1500 (T&FN, March '10), she asserts that she definitely isn't finished with her flagship event:

T&FN: Last year, we wrote about the prospects of U.S. women in the 1500. Are you still mainly a steeplechaser, or are you weighing your prospects in other distances and especially the 1500?

Simpson In A Nutshell

•**Personal:** Jennifer Mae Baringer was born August 23, 1986, in Webster City, Iowa; 5-5/119 (1.65/54). Married to Jason Simpson

•**Schools:** Oviedo (Florida) HS '05; Colorado '09; now represents New Balance

•**PRs:** 800—2:02.12 ('10); 1500—3:59.90 CR ('09); Mile—4:25.91i CR ('09); Steeple—9:12.50 AR ('09); 3000—8:42.03i CR ('09); 5000—15:01.70i OT ('09)

•**Coaches:** Jay Getty (HS); Mark Wetmore (Colorado, pro); Juli Benson (pro)

•**Major Meets:** 3000—12)NCI '07; 1)NCI '09. St—1)NC '06; 7)NC, 1)US, 7h)WC '07; 1)NC, 3)OT, 9)OG '08; 1)NC, 1)US, 5)WC '09. 5000—3)US '10

•**World/U.S. Rankings:** 1500—x/4 '09. Steeple—x/7 '06; x/2 '07; 10/1 '08; 6/1 '09.

because it was seen as a distance event. But it really is a middle-distance event.

You have to be really ballistic and really strong, more like a 1500 runner. Especially when the gears shift in the steeple and you're shifting with plyometrics in the middle of it. And working on one compliments the other.

But to answer your question, I am interested in running more 1500s. When I ran at Pre [3:59.90 CR in '09], it was like my fifth 1500 race ever. I hadn't run it much in college.

One thing [Colorado coach] Mark Wetmore told us was, "You never perform above your ability." Whatever you do is what is inside of you. You can only perform under your potential. I believe that what I did was no fluke. I'm excited about it and I own it. So if

Pre really was only my fifth 1500, then the sky's the limit.

T&FN: Does the level of competition matter?

Simpson: I think my own racing in the past has shown that really difficult and challenging competitions bring out the best in me. I think I'll be most challenged and closer in the 1500 and that's exciting for me. And I think the 1500 and steeple is a good match not only for this ability that I didn't discover I had until much later, but also for my personality.

T&FN: Have you learned from your Worlds and Olympic steeples not only that it's more a middle-distance race but also about your competitiveness?

Simpson: I think so. Some of my most surprising races in college were like when I was a freshman and won NCAAs. It was just out of nowhere. But it wasn't a surprise to me because I hadn't had any other steeples that year that were for such high stakes. I knew in the Big 12 meet that I would have to come back and run the 5K. Then Regionals were just about qualifying.

But the NCAA was my first race of, "OK, leave it all on the track." The same thing with the Worlds: there's nothing after that, so you leave everything there.

Those meets—NCAAs as a freshman, the Prefontaine 1500 and the Berlin Worlds—are the only places where I've had big PRs.

So having those types of opportunities has shown me over and over that somehow I'm able to muster what it takes to rise to the occasion. I like to think that going back to the Worlds is going to continue to bring out the best in me.

T&FN: After your injury was diagnosed, you look a lot of time off. Is it fair to say that missing the running—the activity that made you famous—wasn't that difficult because you knew the cause?

Simpson: Yes. And also it was exhausting to go through the Olympic year in '08, then the whole '09 season and up to about January of last year when a lot of shoe companies made a big splash about my coming out of college.

All of that was more exhausting

“Something I feel I learned throughout college is that the steeple is more similar to the 1500 than to the 5K”



than I realized.

So it wasn't as difficult as you might think to step back and be a little selfish for a while. Just spend some time on my own and with my husband, and also getting to know my coach Juli Benson better.

T&FN: *While there were many circumstances, your American Record was your last steeple. Have you missed it?*

Simpson: For me, the steeple is a really thrilling event. So I miss the thrill that goes with it. Also in the steeple, the people next to you are the least of your concerns, yet that's something I'm learning.

I know it sounds kind of amateur [laughs], but I really am kind of amateur when it comes to racing people instead of thinking about the barriers and time-trialing.

I don't say that in any conceited way, because I'm humbled by it and excited to really learn to be intelligent and tactical in races. I'm discovering it's a really fascinating skill that I think is, in many ways, inherent. You either have it or you don't—and if you don't, you have a lot to learn. But yes, I do miss the steeple because it's super-fun and exciting.

T&FN: *You call it "thrilling" because of what?*

Simpson: I think it's because of an absence of tactics. There aren't many top-level steeples that have ever been tactical. You just run it hard. I think it's a totally different feeling running a steeple. Typically, there aren't huge gear-changes.

It's really a great race for a strong person and I don't mean that just because of the barriers. People at the world-class level usually run them really hard. So I miss that. And it's thrilling because of the element of danger. You never know what might happen.

T&FN: *[Gulnara] Galkina really took it out in Beijing. You ran a then-AR 9:22.26 for 9th, so what was it like being in a World Record race?*

Simpson: It was great in two senses. First just to be a part of it, a race that's in the recordbooks.

Second, it was awesome to me because I was on the same straightaway! [laughs] It was exciting to see the winner finish.

So quite literally, a time like that is in my sights.

T&FN: *Mark Wetmore directed you to the steeple?*

Simpson: I give Mark 100% credit for putting me in the steeple. It wasn't run in high school in Florida, so I hadn't even seen one until like two weeks before I first raced it my freshman year in '06. I give a lot of credit to him for

Collegiate Finale A Downer

After the '09 Worlds, Jenny Simpson returned to Colorado for her final semester of school (as a dual political science-economics major) and last NCAA cross country season.

She ran unbeaten at the Pre-Nationals, Big 12 and Regional. But in the NCAA she shockingly collapsed after 4K before struggling home in 1:63rd. It was an inglorious end to her college running career, but she has put it in perspective:

"Most people don't ask about that, like it's something you have to tiptoe around. But I feel like I have a pretty good grip about it. It was just the perfect storm: first, I was in my last semester of school and I had built that into [something] bigger than life. I wanted to get straight A's to finish college with a 3.8 GPA. [Plus] I was exhausted from the long track seasons back to '07 and getting into school late after returning from championships.

"Then the gun went off at the NCAA and instead of being in race mode, I thought, 'Wow, this is it.' That's not a good position to put yourself in. I didn't have good mental control as far as how I approached the race.

"The one thing that sets that race apart in my mind is that I *love* to race. And wherever I finish, I hope that it's so apparent that I just really enjoy running. It should have been fun, but it was the one race of my entire career that I was really dreading.

"[But] I just refuse to let it be a kind of dark smudge on my career. I also can say, 'Look, I'm human.' That was made very obvious to me; I was very humbled by that race.

"The ironic thing is, since I have been out of school, résumés have gone out and not one person has asked me what my GPA was. So I look back and think that what seemed so important then... you have to be realistic. 'What are my priorities?' But as a side note, I did make a 4.0 GPA that semester, so I had an overall 3.8. And I did make the honor roll."

recognizing the abilities that made me really well-suited for it from the start.

I'll never forget the first time I ran it. I ran 10:19.08 at the Cardinal meet at Stanford. Mark had said, "I just want you to try it. If you hate it, you'll never have to run it again." So I ran it and even though I did 10:19, I crossed the finish and thought, "I'm never running this again. This was terrible."

But Mark said, "Well, there's bad news because we need someone to run it at Conference." So giving it a second chance was Mark's "fault," but also was really wise. I then kind of saw a future for myself in it. He might

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Simpson Interview

have identified some grittiness in me that could translate well to the steeple.

T&FN: *So now are you looking ahead to the next championship cycle of this year's Worlds in Daegu, then the London Olympics and the '13 Worlds in Moscow? Or are you just taking it a year at a time?*

Simpson: I really am taking it year by year. I think the injury last summer was good as an opportunity for me to slow down for the first time in a lot of years. I realized I don't have to have plans for five months from now, let alone five years from now.

Another aspect of transitioning out of college is that the college schedule is so set in stone. It really is an illusion because you can't pick your races.

When it comes down to it, there are only two or three options after you consider Regionals and Nationals. Only a couple or three East Coast or West Coast races and that's about it.

So it's very different to go from that to now and having a lot of freedom in your schedule, in what events you'll run and how you're going to diversify what you want to accomplish.

It's exciting to know that we can be flexible, even if something changes in mid-season. As a professional, I could run a race like Prefontaine and say, "Hey, let's go get in a rockin' 1500 and see what we can really do."

T&FN: *Do you think at this point in terms of ultimate time goals you would like to run in at least the 1500 and steeple, if not the 5000 too?*

Simpson: The steeple isn't a race of the past for me yet. I actually went over a couple of hurdles a few days ago [laughs]. Fortunately, it's just like riding a bike. When you come back, it's almost just like where you left off.

I would say in the steeple, less than other events, I don't really have unfinished business there. I feel like I already have accomplished a lot in it. I really have an appreciation and a love for what it has done for my career and what it has provided me the last couple of years in terms of opportunities.

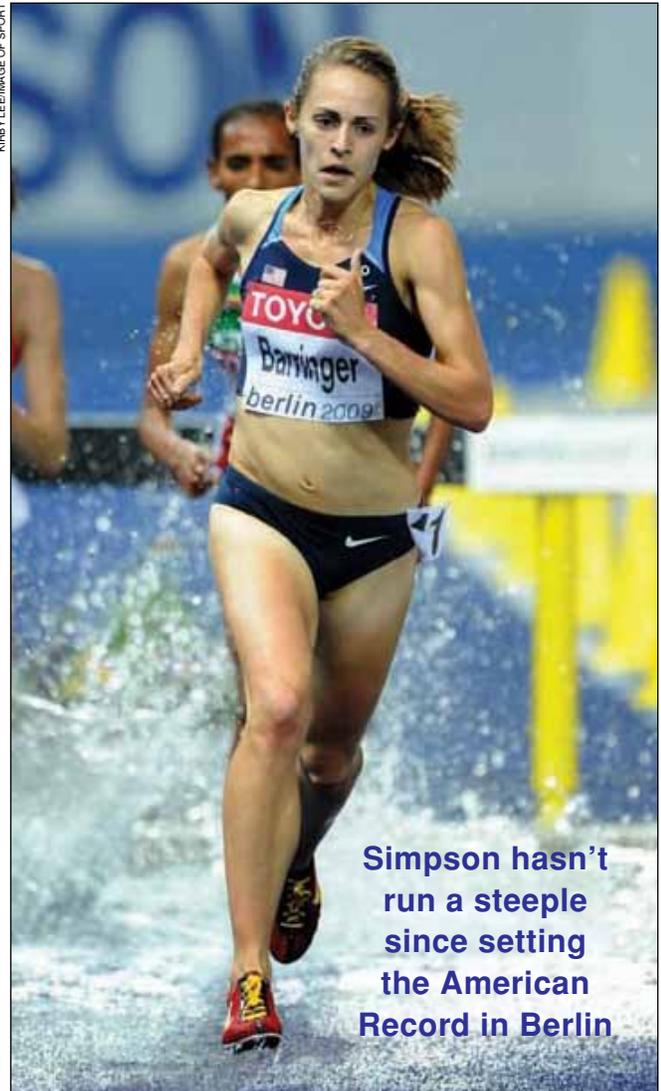
So I do feel I've really gotten to experience that event and there is less pressure. I do feel a lot of peace about it; that I could walk away and say, "That was a great couple of years."

Yet it's really exciting to jump back at it, because as far as the pressure I put on myself, I don't feel like I have unfinished goals there. So it should be a lot of fun just to get out there and see how fast can I go.

T&FN: *And how about the 1500?*

Simpson: It's at the totally opposite end. I feel like it's a new frontier for me. So that's exciting, but also terrifying in different ways. I don't have to clear barriers, but there will be quite the expectations from knowledgeable people in the sport that I could be good at it. I always want to be as good as I feel, and people close to me feel, I can be. So that unexplored

KIRBY LEE/IMAGE OF SPORT



Simpson hasn't run a steeple since setting the American Record in Berlin

horizon is equally exciting.

T&FN: *But having been in a World Record steeple, it's almost like the event is saying to you, "Hey, don't leave me yet!"*

Simpson: [laughs] It's really true because I've only had a very few chances to be in a race where others are going for a 9:00 time. And it's the training for the steeple that's so grueling, not so much the race itself. Only time will tell, but it will be interesting as an experiment because from '07 through '09, I did a lot of steeple training. This whole last year, I really haven't trained for it.

So it will be revealing to see if just another year of running—of focusing on getting faster rather than a lot stronger on the barriers—helps or hurts what I'm able to do in the steeple. [laughs] There's no manual about how to train for that event. □